

# Political Influence on Theatre Historiography: Jewish Memory Topics in Lithuania

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## ABSTRACT

The article discusses the question of the memory of Jewish history and culture in Lithuania in regard to the cultural and political debates that are actually taking place in Lithuanian society. Historical facts, concerning Jewish cultural life in Lithuania before the Second World War, were eliminated from the research field conducted by historiographers during the Soviet and the early post Soviet times. The article argues that this was due to political aspirations of the country; they play the crucial role in defining what type of memories the society would carry on and defend. In regard to the research done by sociologists Maurice Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann's notions of collective memory, functional and stored memory are discussed. Examples of the recent media persecutions of cultural personas such as Rūta Vanagaitė and Marius Ivaškevičius are discussed in order to illustrate the memory war that is still taking place in the actual Lithuanian society.

## KEYWORDS

Collective memory, stored memory, functional memory, Jewish theatre, Yiddish culture, Lithuania between the World Wars

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# Political Influence on Theatre Historiography: Jewish Memory Topics in Lithuania

## INTRODUCTION

Theatre is one of the most important means of revealing issues related to memory and its impact on contemporary societies. This importance is carefully analysed in the texts of prominent theatre researchers Marvin Carlson<sup>1</sup> and Freddie Rokem<sup>2</sup>. In his book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson defines theatre as a site of memory, where memories of texts, bodies, spaces, and time play a fundamental role in the reception of theatre and recognition of its role in society. The author presumes that theatre is a part of the cultural memory of Western or Eastern societies and that it is on these memories that the theatre of their societies is grounded. The book offers multiple insights and examples which illustrate how memory impregnates all the facets of this rich cultural activity which is called 'theatre'. Similarly, Freddie Rokem's *Performing History*, is a profound analysis of performances revealing liminal social occurrences such as the French revolution or the Holocaust. He insists that those events and their representations in contemporary theatre form a certain memory field in which fundamental representations of statehood are coined.

However, there are countries where not only may theatre as a historical phenomenon be neglected, but the entire cultural capital of the nation deleted from the collective memory of the society. This is the case with Jewish history and culture in Lithuania. Jews played a significant role in Lithuanian social life until the tragedy of the Holocaust during the Second World War. Lithuanian scholars only recently began to study the historical sources around Jewish topics.<sup>3</sup> Although Jewish theatre existed in Lithuania from the beginning of the 20th century until the Second World War, no traces of it were found in the historiography of Lithuanian theatre until 2017. Public debates concerning the role that Lithuanians have played in Jewish massacres, only began in recent years and were motivated by people actively involved in Lithuanian theatre life, such as Marius Ivaškevičius and Rūta Vanagaitė.

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1 Carlson 2003.

2 Rokem 2002.

3 Sirutavičius, Staliūnas, Šiaučiūnaitė-Virbickienė 2012.

In order to reveal why Jewish history, including that of theatre, was neglected or remains difficult to discuss in contemporary Lithuanian society, this article will analyse two examples – that of Jewish theatre history and that of the impact of contemporary theatre people on the debates around Jewish history in Lithuania. I shall presume that political aspirations and agendas of a country play a crucial role in defining what type of memories the society would carry on and defend. My research will be based on prominent works in the field of memory studies, namely that of Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and Jan and Alaida Assmann (2006, 2011). What are the reasons for eliminating historical facts from social memory and how does the society react to the fact that some parts of its history are consistently eradicated from the collective memory, whereas other parts are highlighted – these will be the topics discussed in this paper.

In part one, I provide a brief overview of the history of Jewish theatre in Lithuania as well as the impact of the Second World War and the Holocaust on Lithuanian research agendas. Further I discuss the conflict between what Maurice Halbwachs would define as collective memory and the Assmanns as cultural memory. Finally, I present two recent debates provoked by theatre activists concerning the topic; Rūta Vanagaitė and Marius Ivaškevičius.

## **ABSENCE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Before 2013, the historical manifestations of Jewish theatre in Lithuania were not studied – neither by Lithuanian, or by foreign researchers.<sup>4</sup> One could find in various internet sites dedicated to Jewish culture just a mention of *The Vilna Troupe*, recently abundantly researched by Debra Caplan in her study *Yiddish Empire – The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theatre, and the Art of Itinerancy*.<sup>5</sup> But *The Vilna Troupe* was mostly known not for its activities in Vilnius, where the troupe was born in 1915, but for its performances in Poland and later in Europe and the USA. During the period between the World Wars, Vilnius was part of Poland and was given no attention by Lithuanian Jewish theatre scholars at a time, when Kaunas was playing an important role as temporary capital of the country and where Jewish theatre was flourishing.

No traces of Jewish theatre in Soviet theatre historiography are found in any search. One of the reasons why Soviet Lithuanian theatre researchers were studying only Lithuanian theatre but not that of the Jewish minority, could have been the need to act against the unifying Soviet propaganda that was spread in all the republics of the regime. The only way to support the ethnic Lithuanian narrative was to solidify those narratives which concerned Lithuanian history, including that of Lithuanian national theatre. The latter emerged in 1920 and existed as a theatre of an independent state only for short twenty years. Soviet theatre historians tried to collect all the possible memories of this phenomenon and to promote it through writing about it.

Lithuanian theatre history was revised after the declaration of the second independence in 1991 and a study concerning Lithuanian theatre history of the thirties appeared in 2002. Nevertheless, it dedicated only three pages to the history

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4 Pukelytė 2017.

5 Caplan 2018.

of Jewish theatre.<sup>6</sup> The author of the article considered Jewish theatre mediocre and amateur, without delivering any reliable testimonies. A more solid study concerning Jewish culture in Lithuania, namely the musical life of the period between the World Wars, appeared in 2008 and was written by Leonidas Melnikas.<sup>7</sup> This book is about famous Jewish musicians, some of whom became part of the international musical world. Again, it reveals almost nothing about the Jewish theatre.

This ignorance about Jewish theatre in Lithuania in the years between the World Wars compels us to seek the reasons for this amnesia. Why has an intensely active theatre which, for instance, attracted bigger audiences than the Lithuanian National Theatre in 1931, not been included in broader research about Jewish culture in Lithuania? Lithuanian National Theatre consisted of three troupes at that time; drama, opera, and ballet. It had a theatre building with around 700 seats and was supported by the state, whereas Jewish theatre had no permanent troupe and rented a shabby place called *Liaudies namai* (*People's House*) in the Old Town of Kaunas. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, in 1931 there were 83 thousand spectators at the National theatre and 90 thousand spectators at the Jewish theatre.<sup>8</sup> These figures demonstrate that public interest in Jewish theatre was significant.

One could console oneself by saying that such amnesia has been common not only in Lithuania but also in other European countries. Morten Thing, a Danish researcher, admits that Danish theatre researchers knew nothing about Danish Jewish theatre until recently either.<sup>9</sup> Latvian researchers are still convinced that there is not enough evidence of Jewish theatre in Latvia during the years between the World Wars, therefore no research has been conducted, although my Lithuanian research shows that Jewish theatre was active there.

So, why have theatre researchers paid no attention to it despite the fact that Jewish theatre was very active and popular among both Jewish and other inhabitants of the country? One of the reasons could be that Jewish plays were performed before the Second World War in the Yiddish language, which was not and still is not considered in Israel as a language which should represent Jews on the political level of the country. Yiddish was spoken in family circles of the descendants of Eastern Europe (approx. 30 percent of inhabitants), whereas the rest of the inhabitants of Israel did not understand it at all. Recent development of film industry and an augmenting interest in Yiddish culture illustrate a certain revival of Yiddish, but these activities are not on the political agenda of the country, therefore are supported only minimally.

Another reason, which is more relevant to the Lithuanian context, is that more than 95 percent of Lithuanian Jews were killed during the Holocaust. The Holocaust in Lithuania continues to be a very painful topic which raises fierce discussions about the part that Lithuanians played in the massacres of Jews. Recent accusations thrown at the writers Rūta Vanagaitė and Marius Ivaškevičius and diffused by Lithuanian media illustrate this. But before trying to understand their viewpoints and the social impact of their proclamations, we shall briefly

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6 Aleksaitė 2002, 278-282.

7 Melnikas 2008.

8 Metraštis 1939, 124.

9 Thing 2012.

discuss the theoretical insights into functional and stored memory in order to better understand the ongoing process in Lithuanian society.

### **INTERRUPTED MEMORY**

Firstly, let us look into the historical context that determined the development of Jewish culture in Lithuania and, consequently, the memories that we have about it. We shall rely on the notion of collective memory as developed by Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist of Jewish origin, active between the two world wars. Halbwachs analysed memory questions in regard to three social aspects; family, religion, and social class.<sup>10</sup> The last aspect, i.e. social class, allows us to better understand the role that the Jewish diaspora has played in Lithuanian economic and cultural life between the wars. According to Halbwachs, the importance of social class depends firstly on its capacity to anchor in a certain place by means of attributes belonging to that social class, for example, relics transmitted from one generation to another, pictures, stories, and so on. Those who have the biggest quantity of such attributes belong in general to the noble class, or aristocracy. Aristocracy, according to Halbwachs, is the main carrier of the collective memory. All the other classes, such as the bourgeoisie or traders, are largely concerned with the immediate and are more interested in earning a living than in a collective past. Therefore, it is more difficult to consider these social classes as supporters and transmitters of memory and tradition.

A Jewish community has lived in Lithuanian territory for more than five hundred years but it was never considered as a part of Lithuanian aristocracy or upper class. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jewish community consisted of small craftsmen and tradesmen. This community was often threatened by pogroms, it could never stay long in one place and was always ready to move. Therefore, it could neither accumulate nor store any tangible or intangible goods.

When Lithuania became an independent state in 1918, the Jewish diaspora was finally recognized as an ethnic part of this newly born state. The post of Jewish minister was even established for taking care of Jewish affairs. It existed from 1919 until 1924. From that date on Lithuanian Jews were considered to have the same rights and possibilities as Lithuanians and other ethnic groups. One could say that the Jewish diaspora could finally take a breath and start to store a more significant social and cultural capital in one place. The thirties are considered a Jewish golden age in Lithuania.<sup>11</sup> Due to the activity of Jewish political parties, cultural and educational activities were developing rapidly, many newspapers in Yiddish and Hebrew languages were published, theatres were active, concerts and theatre tours were taking place. Both cultural traditions – Yiddish and Hebrew – were equally important. At that time the Jewish community would have been valued not only with regards to its functional nature but also in regard to its possibility to transmit collective memory and tradition for future generations.

As we know, this possibility was abolished by the Second World War and the Holocaust. Death in ghettos and concentration camps, organized by the Nazis, deportations to Siberia, organized by the Soviets, and the totalitarian Stalin's regime

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<sup>10</sup> Halbwachs 1992, 81-82.

<sup>11</sup> Katz 2010, 324.

led to a situation where most of the memories of the former independent Lithuania became politically dangerous. Therefore, these memories, according to a German researcher Aleida Assmann, were no longer functional and they found themselves in a situation where memories were stored. Assmann, together with her husband, describes these traumatic memories as also experiential memories. They are intentionally faded out of the memory of those individuals who have experienced liminal situations. Nevertheless, these memories continue to exist – they are, states Assmann, latent and can remain like that from one generation to another.

Stored or latent memory, according to Jan Assmann, is a part of cultural memory. Cultural memory “enables the individual to dispose freely of his stock of memories and grants him the opportunity to orient himself in the entire expanse of his memory spaces. In certain circumstances cultural memory liberates people from the constraints of bonding memory.”<sup>12</sup> Cultural memory involves what is obsolete, non-instrumentalized, hereditary, subversive, or not recognized. Stored memory is as important as functional (or bonding) memory, and both form the basics of cultural memory. One could say that stored memory allows societies to verify the reliability of functional memory and to navigate into a more consistent future.

According to Aleida Assmann, the main difference between functional and stored memory is that functional memory “is connected with individual persons who embody it as bearers and addressees. Collective agents such as states or nations create for themselves a functional identity memory through which they adapt a certain version of the past and define their goals for the future. Stored memory provides no such foundation for identity; its specific and no less important use lies in presenting more and other memories than are considered relevant by the present frames of functional memory.”<sup>13</sup> There are tensions and contradictions between these two kinds of memories. One tends to censor a certain part of memory, the other considers it hereditary; one is in the centre and the other is in the margins.

These tensions precondition not only the dynamics of culture, but also its change and renewal. As Aleida Assmann notes, “if the borders between functional and storage memory remain permeable, elements can be changed, patterns of meaning can be altered, and even the general framework can be restructured. Without this border traffic between different realms of cultural memory, drawing upon a reservoir of unused possibilities, alternatives, contradictions, criticisms and unremembered incidents, change would be excluded and memory would be fixed and made absolute.”<sup>14</sup>

Breakthroughs to cultural memory become possible when there are changes in political systems. Due to these changes, new forms of collective memory are constructed. This may be illustrated by the political events in Europe at the end of the 20th century. As soon as the wall of Berlin disintegrated, the same happened to the stories that supported these political systems. Collective memory that was promoted by socialist governments was no longer valid. Many suppressed testimonies emerged in Lithuania as well as in other newly reborn European countries. They revealed political repressions, traumatic memories, until then

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12 Assmann 2006, 21.

13 Ibid, 127-128.

14 Ibid, 130.



forbidden identity stories. Some of these stories were related to the First Republic of independent Lithuania and dedicated to strengthen and foster the renewal of Lithuanian identity. Other stories had to reveal the traumatic experiences of the first decade after the Second World War, when Lithuanian partisans, who had retreated into the woods, expected American help in their fight against the Soviets. Most of the partisans were finally killed by those who supported the Soviet regime and there was always a fear of talking about them during the Soviet times, to avoid putting oneself in danger.

Many stories of the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century revealed the deportations of Lithuanian families to Siberia and the horrors of the crimes of the KGB<sup>15</sup>. These stories, related to experiential memory, have been in the so-called “no man’s land” for more than fifty years. Then, suddenly, when it was allowed, witnesses delivered their memories to the society. Some of them were of very good artistic quality; some of them were just compilations of documentary facts. Nevertheless, they helped the society to construct a new Lithuanian post-Soviet identity. This identity was ethno-cultural and had a strong aspect of victimization. It was supported for many years by the state. It guaranteed, according to Nerija Putinaite, “the priority of ethnic culture in regard to other cultures that appear or could appear in the field of Lithuanian identity. The state protects this identity, so that this ethnic authenticity would not be distorted by the ‘otherness’ of other cultural forms.”<sup>16</sup>

This ethno-cultural identity began to crack when Lithuania entered the European Union in 2004. Increasingly, opinions appeared suggesting that Lithuanian culture lacked civilization, interaction, or openness to other cultures. Statements indicated that Lithuania tried to avoid recognizing the importance for Lithuanian culture of such foreigners or so-called “peripheral” individuals such as writers Adam Mickiewicz and Oskaras Milašius, philosophers Levas Karsavinas and Emmanuel Levin, painters Neemija Arbit Blatas and Mstislav Dobujinski, architect Vladimiras Dubeneckis. As Assmann points out, “a culture that does not value the ‘otherness’ of the past for its own sake, does not create those open spaces in which the arts, the sciences and the imagination can flourish.”<sup>17</sup> According to her, only in such an environment which is not related to the aims and needs of today, the possibilities of exploration and innovation find their way.

Research on Jewish theatre in Lithuania is a part of this newly discovered inter-cultural environment. The necessity for such exploration is motivated by a phenomenon which Polish researcher Ruth Ellen Gruber defines as “virtual Jewishness”<sup>18</sup>. According to her, this virtual Jewishness is conditioned by the horror of the emptiness in countries where Litvaks lived before the Holocaust, be it Poland, Lithuania or Belarus. One feels, writes Gruber, the necessity to fill in this emptiness and to get rid of the “phantomic pain”. If this pain really exists, it is up to individual imagination. What is certain is that stored memory cannot be subordinated to intentionally determined state-policies; it functions as a Freudian

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15 KGB - committee of the state security.

16 Putinaite 2014, 70.

17 Assmann 2006, 130.

18 Gruber 2004, 12.

obsession, is subconscious, and reveals itself to society despite official discourses. More and more countries try to regain the layers of lost Jewish culture. And more and more individuals of non-Jewish origins become interested in this culture, trying to reconstruct and to revive it, even if Jews themselves, living now in Israel or in the United States, do not or do not want to understand what these newly born generations of European citizens can have in common with the culture that was destroyed by their predecessors and why they might want to appropriate it.

## MEMORY WAR

The cases of Rūta Vanagaitė and Marius Ivaškevičius illustrate the confrontation between the functional memory that a certain part of society would like to maintain and the stored memory that is fluid and tries to modify the already approved state-narratives.

Vanagaitė's activities as a public persona started at the end of the Soviet period. She completed her theatre research studies in Moscow in 1978 and became a theatre critic, writing for different Lithuanian magazines. Later she founded the first international theatre festival, *Life*, in Lithuania in 1991 and became a producer of Eimuntas Nekrošius' performances. When the duo split, Vanagaitė continued to produce a popular TV entertainment show *Pagauk kampa* (*Catch the Drift*), then created a project *1984. Survival Drama* in 2007. This project was, and still is, performed in an abandoned bunker near Vilnius. The participants of the project can experience the horrors of the Soviet system with the help of actors. Vanagaitė also founded a successful public relations company in 2001, participated in a programme *Active Memory*, and was active in liberal parties. Her first books, written in 2014 and 2015, were dedicated to family topics such as parental care and women ageing. They made her a popular entertainment writer. In 2016 she published a book under a title *Mūsiškiai* (*The Ours*). This time it was meant not to entertain but to present the testimonies of Jewish massacres which she discovered in Lithuanian archives. The author attempted to demonstrate that Lithuanians took an important part in the massacres of Jews in Lithuania and Belarus in the beginning of the 1940s. The book became a commercial success but was not regarded as serious research by the professional historians. Later, in 2017, the writer expressed herself in the media about one of the most important Lithuanian heroes of the resistance against the Soviets, partisan Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas who was tortured to death by the KGB in 1957. Vanagaitė raised a question as to whether he was as heroic as official history represented him. This caused a huge scandal: all her books were retrieved from sales by her publishing house the day after the announcement and the media as well as a great part of the society accused her of being loyal to Russians and Jews.<sup>19</sup> The attack on the writer was so intense that it recalled the case of the witches of Salem described by Arthur Miller in *The Crucible*. A very influential Lithuanian politician, Vytautas Landsbergis, in one of his articles, proposed that the writer commit a self-punishment act; she was publicly nicknamed Dušanskienė, wife of the post-war bandit Dušanskis who persecuted the above-mentioned partisan.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Jackevičius, Saldžiūnas 2017.

20 Landsbergis 2017.



There were few opinions which defended Vanagaitė's right to express herself and to open the space, like Assmann, for the questioning of the existing collective memory. One of the opinions was that of Ivaškevičius, who compared the attack to one by the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>21</sup>

Ivaškevičius began his professional life as journalist and drama writer in the last decade of the 20th century. He became known as a theatre writer after he had created a new postmodern drama language in his plays *Kaimynas* (*The Neighbour*) and *Artimas miestas* (*The Nearby City*). He published a historical novel *Žali* (*The Greens*) in 2002 in which he raised questions concerning Lithuanian partisans who were defending Lithuanian liberty after the Second World War. Ivaškevičius organized a commemorative march in Molėtai, his native town, in 2016. This march was dedicated to Molėtai Jews, killed during the Second World War.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, he won a Tolerance award in 2017 from the Sugihara<sup>23</sup> foundation *Diplomats for Life*. Interestingly, the novel *The Greens* raised little public debate when the book appeared but suddenly gained the centre of attention in 2019, when Ivaškevičius was proposed as a candidate for the National Prize for Culture and Art for his recent activities as theatre writer and activist. Public letters appeared, initiated by former pro-nationalist parliament members, which accused Ivaškevičius of distorting Lithuanian history. The writer was forced to respond to the accusations publicly. He compared the campaign against him to a hunt organized by a group of people who have lost their political power and were trying to put themselves on the map while chasing victims. In his article, he explained what it was he wanted to articulate in his book and concluded that he would "not write a book, concerning this subject" anymore because, according to him, those who try to do it will be treated as strangers and chased with fire.<sup>24</sup> The intent to slander Ivaškevičius did not stop even after he got the national award. He was called by the police some weeks later, after he gave an interview to a radio station, stating that "we pushed away a lot of Polish speaking people, pushed away and killed Jews."<sup>25</sup> This police persecution provoked public debate once again and the accusations were denied. Nevertheless, the war against Ivaškevičius and Vanagaitė did not stop. An anonymous group of people sent letters entitled *Death to Ivaškevičius* and *Death to Vanagaitė* to various media outlets asking for information which would compromise these two persons. An internet page was created in February 2019 that would publish negative information about the writers. Pre-trial investigation concerning this page started after one parliament member contacted a prosecutor's office.

These two cases illustrate the severe tension between the already established functional memory and the stored memory that would try to interrogate the validity of the established memory. As Ivaškevičius rightly notes, collective or functional memory is mostly represented by those who have lost their power and influence

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21 Ivaškevičius 2017.

22 Antanavičius 2016.

23 Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat in Kaunas in 1939-1940. He saved several thousands of Jews in Lithuania by distributing them transit visas so that they could escape Nazi persecutions. Actually there is a museum in Kaunas— Sugihara House – where artefacts of his deed are exposed and showed to tourists.

24 Ivaškevičius 2017.

25 15min. 2019.

in the society but still want to impose their values and norms. These carriers of functional memory distinguish themselves by refusing discussion and change. They defend the norm and do not allow any questioning of it. Public and legal persecution are the means that they use in order to scare those who try to question the validity of the established truth.

The tension between functional and stored memory reaches the highest level when the question about the responsibility of Lithuanians concerning Jewish massacres surfaces. It divides the society into two camps and consistently raises conflicts. This indicates that a significant part of Lithuanian society is still not ready after more than seventy years to evaluate the situation objectively and to open mental barriers that would allow the flow of stored memory to enter reality. Although there are political efforts to move forward, traumatic memories still dominate and do not allow more critical discussion. The official memory discourse is still based on the one created during the first Lithuanian independence and maintained during the Soviet times as a means of opposition to the Soviet regime. It is still unclear at the state level how one should cope with the memories that do not exactly correspond to the image Lithuania would like to present to the world.

Meanwhile, the new generation of researchers are doing their job in the archives and picking out memory boxes which were stored there for more than seventy years without anyone demonstrating interest. As Jan Assmann would say, this stored memory would have no possibility of becoming part of cultural memory if access to it was forbidden. As with any other democratic country, Lithuania provides free access to its archives. It is time to use the stored memory for the renewal of functional memory. That is what an interpreter is trying to do while creating from pieces of this stored memory a kind of integral story. Inevitably, he/she makes this stored memory functional. With the help of these newly constructed stories he/she seeks to influence the identity of a society and to give it new dynamic impulses. It is through such constantly renewed textual interpretation that this identity is being formed; it becomes a gesture of remembering. The interpreter serves as a person who remembers and reminds about the forgotten.

To conclude, stored memories can assume not one but multiple identities. They allow for the discussion of the necessity for one fixed identity and of the consequences that such a concept may have in contemporary society. As the examples of the elimination of Jewish theatre from Lithuanian theatre history and the persecution of the writers Vanagaitė and Ivaškevičius illustrate, Lithuanian society, while treating its history only as an instrument of fortification and not that of openness to differences, can lose the possibility of understanding itself better and being more consistent in its development.

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